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SUBJECT: TURKEY: GOVERNING AKP BACKSLIDING ON INTRAPARTY
DEMOCRACY

Classified By: Janice G. Weiner, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. PM Erdogan's governing Justice and Development Party (AKP) claims to support democratic pluralism and is generally considered to be more internally democratic than other Turkish political parties. AKP,s senior leadership, though, routinely interferes in provincial conventions and has recently expelled from the party AKP MPs and other members who publicly disagree with the leadership. The AKP is a diverse coalition and the leadership,s opposition to intraparty democracy may be intended to balance the factions within the party. End Summary.

AKP Initially Supported Intraparty Democracy and Dissent

¶2. (C) When the governing and pro-Islam Justice and Development Party (AKP) was formed in the summer of 2001, the party,s founders claimed that AKP would be a new kind of Turkish political party. The party,s founders emphasized the importance of intraparty democracy, collegial decision-making, and open debate. In August 2001, Erdogan even paraphrased Voltaire, saying, "I do not agree with your views, but I am ready to give away my life for you to be able to express your views freely."

¶3. (C) On March 1, 2003, in a free vote, over 100 AKP MPs defected from the position advocated by their party,s leadership and voted against authorizing the U.S. military to enter Iraq from Turkish soil. At the time, this move was hailed by many observers as an indication of AKP,s commitment to intraparty democracy --- a first in Turkey.

Party Leadership Exerts Control

¶4. (C) On February 1, 2003 --- three months after AKP,s November 2002 electoral victory and a month before the famous March 1 vote --- AKP,s Founders, Board adopted nine undemocratic amendments to the party bylaws which increased the power of party provincial and sub-provincial chairmen and dramatically reduced the level of intraparty democracy. One amendment allowed the party chairman to give a single individual from the Central Administrative Board the power to expel members from the party. Another amendment allowed provincial and sub-provincial party chairmen, rather than provincial or sub-provincial conventions, the power to

appoint most local AK Party officials. A third amendment gave party convention chairmen greater control over the convention process.

15. (C) Over the past few months, Prime Minister Erdogan and the senior leadership within AKP have repeatedly interfered in local AKP conventions. The AKP leadership wants local party conventions to nominate only a single individual for that province's party chairmanship. In some cases, the AKP leadership is openly intervening in the process in favor of a handpicked candidate. The AKP leadership has further intervened to postpone conventions in Isparta, Bingol, and several other provinces when the delegates refused to nominate only one candidate for the chairmanship. Erdogan summoned the nine strongest of twenty-three candidates in Agri province to Ankara and ordered them to nominate a single candidate for their convention. In Ankara province, Erdogan and other senior party leaders openly intervened to support incumbent chairman Nurettin Akman --- an AKP moderate and longtime Embassy contact --- against a more radical challenger from the poor district of Altindag.

16. (C) Most AK Party members we talk to readily admit the lack of intraparty democracy, but defend the party leadership's right to interfere in provincial conventions. Orhan Kaya, a businessman and a candidate to become the AKP vice-chairman for Ankara province, told us that the AKP leadership is trying to diffuse tensions and balance various factions within the party. Provincial chairmen are powerful and the central party leadership does not want chairmen to gain too much power or build factions within the party. Ismail Safi, a businessman, founding member of AKP, and AKP VP for International Affairs, admitted that AKP is not fully democratic, but reminded us that all Turkish parties are

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undemocratic due to Turkish political traditions. Safi emphasized that AKP remains committed to democracy in the long run. He also pointed out that the AKP leadership is more committed to a strong U.S.-Turkish relationship than the party's grassroots. Ramazan Basak, a young Kurdish businessman from Sanliurfa and a member of the AKP provincial organization in Ankara, told us that Erdogan and the grassroots want AKP to be internally democratic, but other AKP politicians are afraid of intraparty democracy and Erdogan is forced to support their demands in order to keep the party from falling apart. Basak predicts that democratizing reforms will come to AKP with time.

Intolerance of Dissent

17. (C) Tolerance of dissent is another hallmark of internal party democracy. AKP has tolerated dissent, but only to a certain extent, apparently concerned with holding its big tent party together. AKP has expelled several MPs from the party over the past few years for their public statements criticizing the party leadership. Although it is common for Turkish political parties to expel members who publicly disagree with the party leadership, this contradicts AKP's pledge when it was founded five years ago to be a more democratic and open political party.

18. (C) On June 29, the AKP Disciplinary Board expelled maverick Afyon MP Mahmut Kocak from the party. Kocak was expelled on the grounds that his public remarks had harmed the party. He had repeatedly criticized PM Erdogan and the AKP leadership for undermining intraparty democracy and ignoring allegations of corruption. Although a number of AKP deputies --- including Ersonmez Yarbay, Turhan Comez, Ertugrul Yalcinbayir, and Abdullah Caliksan --- spoke out publicly in favor of intraparty dissent and against Kocak's expulsion, the majority of deputies seem to have accepted the AKP Disciplinary Board's decision.

¶9. (C) Kocak is not the only critic expelled from AKP. Hatay MP Fuat Gecen was expelled from the party on June 6 and Istanbul MP Goksal Kucukali resigned from the party in 2005 after his name was sent to the Disciplinary Board. On May 29, six party members in Tarsus were expelled from the party for criticizing the central party leadership. There have been other cases of individuals being expelled or forced to resign from the party too, but some of those were due to corruption allegations.

¶10. (C) Comment. Turkey is a democratic country; but, as in many European countries, intraparty democracy is not the hallmark of Turkish democracy. AKP has built a diverse political coalition pulling together various Islamic groups and many pious but secular, center-right voters. The leadership's opposition to intraparty democracy may be intended to balance the factions within the party or to maintain moderate leadership over the party. The leadership may believe that its strategy is working for now; whether it can, in the future, regain a greater measure of democracy may prove an indicator of its ultimate staying power as a major force on the Turkish political scene. However, if the party's lack of internal democracy slides into authoritarianism, the party will face the same fate as other failed Turkish political parties. End Comment.

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